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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the social, cultural, and psychological problems women of East Indian origin share with other immigrant women in Canada. Also examined are problems that are unique to the East Indian woman and the ways in which she deals with the challenges, conflicting cultural values, and expectations that confront her. The diversity in countries of origin, religious, educational, and cultural backgrounds of the East Indian and other immigrant groups is compared. Other factors considered and compared include the privacy characteristic of East Indian culture, family structure, sex role socialization, achievement socialization and fear of success, language and communication problems, intercultural perceptions of women, and heterosexual relationships. In addition, it is argued that values perceived by people as critical to the inner self such as a sense of identity and self worth should be nurtured and preserved in these East Indian women for a healthy, evolving, "new" self within a host culture and that there is an urgent need for more contact and communication between ethnic "newcomers" and the larger society. (EB)

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Indian Immigrant Aid Services

THE (EAST) INDIAN WOMAN

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THE EAST INDIAN WOMAN

by

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Thank you Mr. Chairman, for giving me the opportunity to share with you some of my research findings and inviting me to participate in this attempt at understanding some similarities and differences between people of various cultures in this country.

INTRODUCTION

I should mention, ladies and gentlemen, at the outset, that although I have an East Indian background, I have never been to India; rather I was born and raised in South Africa. However, I was raised within an East Indian sub-culture, tempered with western culture and to some extent with African culture. But I always retained my interest in East Indian culture, although I left South Africa many years ago. Recently I have tried to use my empirical training and my social-psychological knowledge to research selected aspects of East Indian culture and related problems.

Text of the Keynote address given on December 1, 1976 at the intercultural seminar on 'EAST INDIANS IN TORONTO'.

Sponsored by: Indian Immigrant Aid Services, Toronto and Ontario Ministry of Culture & Recreation.

I commenced the study in an exploratory kind of way looking at the role perceptions, role socialization, and achievement aspirations of middle class women of East Indian origin as compared with a control group of middle class Canadian women of Anglo-Saxon origin. My interest arose from the differences I perceived in the dichotomization of male-female characteristics in North American culture which contrasted markedly with what I had experienced in the subculture in which I had been raised. Contrary to the stereotype of the woman in East Indian culture, I had not experienced the dichotomization of male-female characteristics that typifies attitudes towards males and females in this culture, in particular, with reference to achievement aspirations. As frequently observed in the literature on the psychology of women, the girl in North America who is raised in a traditional manner is expected to be less aggressive, less assertive, than her male counterpart, and she is also expected to be less of an achiever, less educated, less achievement oriented. This has not been my socialization experience, nor has it been the experience of, at least, a nucleus of middle class East Indian women now living in Canada. I had experienced that although most middle class East Indian women are raised within a traditional context, sheltered, and protected, restricted in their freedom outside the home and socialized to be subdued and gentle, these restrictions do not extend to achievement in education. In my experience girls were encouraged to aspire for higher education as much as their male peers. Consequently, I set out to research whether in fact this experience was true of a larger sampling of women of East Indian background with cultural origins and heritage in the East Indian subcontinent.

At this time, I have collected an extensive amount of

data from over 100 East Indian women and I am bringing to closure my collection of data from Canadian women matched on the basis of social class. Data analysis, therefore, is in progress, though incomplete. Hence, the observations, reflections, and insights I hope to offer today should be viewed with caution, and within the perspective of the exploratory nature of the research. I have attempted to inspect and interpret the data with objectivity and sensitivity to the many ethnic groups that I will be discussing this morning.

BASIC, FOCUS OF THE ADDRESS

The chairman has already mentioned the focus of my study; I have addressed myself to the question: What kinds of social, cultural, and psychological problems does the woman of East Indian origin share with other immigrant women; and what kinds of problems are unique to her? How does she meet the challenges, conflicting cultural values, and expectations that confront her? My review of the literature has included readings on Italian women, Portuguese women, Japanese and Chinese American women and West Indian women.

ORIGINS & CHARACTER OF THE POPULATIONS STUDIED

There is a degree of relative uniformity among other immigrants that does not exist among East Indians. For example, Italian and Portuguese immigrants originate largely from a single country and many come from particular areas within the home country, i.e. from rural areas. East Indians, on the other hand, originate from different parts of a huge sub-continent; they come from different parts

of the world. The populations I sampled originate in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Uganda, Guyana, Trinidad and Sri Lanka. Consequently, there exists enormous diversity in countries of origin, in urban, rural or village background as compared to the relative similarities among people from other immigrant groups. Further, people from the European countries are primarily Christian in background; people of East Indian background may be Hindus, Sikhs, Moslems, Christians, Buddhists and sects within these larger religious groupings. Then there is a difference in educational background. My reading indicates that people coming from Italian and Portuguese background, at least in the case of women, have received less formal education than sizable proportions of East Indian women. Many immigrant European women seemingly pursued lower status occupations on first coming to Canada presumably because of lack of formal education and knowledge of English. The education level of East Indian women varies enormously. There exists a nucleus of women who are highly educated, both in Western as well as eastern culture. Then there is a group of women who are well educated in Indian culture- Indian arts, religion, music, and so on. And finally there are people who may/may not speak English as their primary home language and who have received less formal education in both cultures.

THE PRIVACY CHARACTERISTIC OF EAST INDIAN CULTURE

One characteristic which East Indian women share with women inother Asian groups is extreme privacy about their attitudes, values, and relationships. Japanese and Chinese students of mine whom I have encouraged to study their particular ethnic groups - have also discovered the extreme privacy of these cultures.

Questions, which in the North American culture, investigators would not hesitate to ask, for example: questions relating to family relationships - to how boys and girls behave - to how one perceives onself - questions and problems about which people speak openly in North American culture, are considered extremely private in the East Indian culture, and Eastern cultures more generally. Another finding was that, contrary to findings for Italian and Portuguese samples, East Indians do not necessarily respond better to their own in-group interviewers. Studies of Portuguese and Italians indicate that in-group ethnic interviewers are more successful in eliciting valid and reliable responses than out-group ethnic interviewers. This was generally not true of East Indians. They tended to respond more readily to out-group interviewers. Presumably, they preferred talking with "strangers" because they felt more secure about the privacy of their lives. Further, there are many issues East Indian people simply do not talk about openly. For example, I attempted to obtain data regarding attitudes toward inter-ethnic marriage. In talking to respondents I found that they tended to make judgements about feelings based on overt behaviors, because people do not readily verbalize and express their feelings. Some questions respondents seemed to view as threatening; questions, again, that would not be considered threatening in North American culture. For example, there is a tendency not to discriminate between preferential ratings of mother and father. On questions such as: which parent did you admire more, mother or father; which parent did you want to please more, mother or father; respondents tended to give the same ranking to both parents. The East Indian cultural pattern appears to socialize individuals to please, like, and admire both parents equally well. Many women were taken aback when

asked to make an analysis of home situations. Questions requiring critical assessment of family relationships, preferential treatment of children by parents, reflection on the self, induced apprehension and uncertainty in respondents. Such behavior is understandable within the context of Indian culture which is holistic in its approach to life, incorporating life events as they occur, and "flowing" with these events. By contrast, North American culture is critical, analytical and discriminating in its approach to similar life relationships and events. Personal contact, allowing respondents to verbalize their fears, moving from an indirect to a more direct approach in eliciting responses, talking about individual anxieties regarding the effects of empirical research for the larger community, were approaches that contributed to rapport and cooperation. Mailed questionnaires yielded negligible response. Telephone discussions served as an excellent step-in-the-door technique.

HOME CULTURE FAMILY STRUCTURE

The family structure from which many immigrant women originate is much the same as that of the East Indian culture. For example, many immigrant women came from family-centered systems where loyalty to the family is important, father is invariably a benevolent authoritarian, children are expected to contribute to the family once they are working, mother is powerful in her own domain and usually does not work outside the home. Of 89 East Indian female respondents whose data have been analysed thus far, much the same pattern was found. Indian women see themselves as part of the family circle rather than as individuals; they had warm, close, happy relationships with their

families and except for a small nucleus of respondents, most mothers did not work outside their homes, and those who did were mainly in professional occupations. Respondents perceived mother as the primary homemaker; although most respondents' mothers had domestic help in the home. One respondent said about domestics, " you name it and they did it". Respondents, therefore, came from homes in which women were largely freed from the heavier domestic role that characterizes the woman's role in North American culture.

Father was perceived as the dominant figure in the family but as stated earlier, respondents tended not to discriminate between father and mother. They admired both, they tried to please both, they were fond of both equally well. This may be interpreted as a cultural expression or perhaps respondents felt threatened about making such distinctions.

SEX ROLE SOCIALIZATION

With regard to role socialization, respondents perceived many dimensions of similarity for boys and girls. For example, boys and girls were expected to be equally loyal to family, obedient to family, concerned about others, respectful. Girls felt that they had received equal attention from parents as boys and that they were equally important to their parents.

It was in the domain of protection, control of emotions, responsibility for actions, freedom to move outside the home unaccompanied and decisions about important events in the life of the girl that most respondents reported clear differences. "More" was expected of,

and in relation to girls - more control, more discipline, more protection. This pattern is similar to that of many other immigrant cultures and is bound up with the important place of virginity, being "good" and "moral". As with other cultures such as, the Italian, the honour of one's daughters is linked to family honour. A child is essentially a member of a large family unit and every honour and dishonour extends to this unit, to a total family honour.

To the question "what did 'being a girl' mean to you during adolescence?", most respondents singled out the restriction on their movements outside the home. On the whole, no resentment about this was expressed; only one respondent said: "Being born a girl is hell! Terrible to be a girl!

On the whole the negative aspects of the restrictions that they experienced were balanced by a feeling of being "special", "loved by people", "getting attention", some respondents wrote: "I was pleased to be a girl!"

ACHIEVEMENT SOCIALIZATION: FEAR OF SUCCESS

A few years ago, an American psychologist, Matina Horner, identified a significant experience of American female students. She found that even female students who were competing successfully in college and university, feared success, and she linked this fear with a fear of social rejection. In other words, these girls although they were competing successfully at school, feared that they may become unattractive as dating partners, may have poor chances of marriage, and may feel inferior as career women. I wondered about the dynamics of achievement aspirations in a culture where there is no dating system, where every girl's marriage is almost assured because part

of her father's duty is to find a spouse for her and where physical beauty is not such a major component of the marriage requirement as it is in North American culture. In other words, if women experienced no threat regarding their potential on the "marriage market", how did this affect their achievement motivation; are there differences in their achievement-related responses when compared to North American samples?

To study these questions, respondents were asked about their achievement socialization during adolescence and told stories about a female student in a success-oriented setting. The achievement socialization questions included: what parents expected of girls at school, whether girls were rewarded for high achievement, whether boys were given more opportunity to pursue education than girls, etc. The find/ indicate that as adolescents the girls /ings were very ambitious, they had high aspirations at school, they enjoyed school, sometimes imagined becoming someone famous, their parents expected girls and boys to perform equally well and their parents rewarded both boys and girls for high achievement. The one dimension which stands out as a difference in the achievement socialization of boys and girls was on the items: encouragement and discouragement to explore the environment. Adolescent girls were less encouraged, and more discouraged from exploring their environment. This finding ties in with the general restriction and confinement surrounding the adolescent girl in the culture.

Respondents asserted further that there existed a deep respect for learning and education in their homes; they were encouraged to model their behaviour on the better educated people in the family. No respondent had ever heard or ever experienced "fear of success"

because of fear of social rejection, being unattractive as a marriage partner, i.e., the concept of "fear of success" was unknown to them. Respondents' stories about the achievement-related situation generally reflect and confirm this observation.

Respondents' stories centre on family satisfaction and joy at the girl's success, a bright future is predicted and a positive attitude toward the girl's career is taken.

LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

With regard to language and communication problems among East Indian women this research revealed similarities to reported findings for immigrant women more generally. Apart from those women who speak the English language fluently, there appears to be two major problem areas:

(i) Women who speak almost no English, and who understandably fear "moving out" to learn the language at local classes. These women have similar experiences to Italian and Portuguese mothers who do not speak English, i.e., the mothers do not know enough English to speak easily to their children; and their children, who resist learning the original home language, since they want to learn English and identify with their peers, cannot communicate in turn. Consequently, there is a breakdown in mother-child communication and a "generation gap" is created. For the Indian mother this must be a profoundly threatening and isolating experience because the bond between mother and child is viewed as basically crucial in the culture.

(ii) Women who consider English their primary language, and who speak the language well at a concrete level but less well at an abstract level and at a level of generalization. These women should also be encouraged to attend English classes, but educators must be sensitive to the fact that these women consider themselves "English speaking", may be unaware of the different levels at which the language may be spoken, and may be affronted if openly confronted with the prospect of attending English classes.

INTERCULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN

East Indian and Canadian respondents were asked about their perceptions of one another. Three questions were asked as follows:

How do women of East Indian origin (or Canadian) "come across" to you? What do you like about them, and what do you dislike about them?

In general, in talking to East Indians the indirect approach was used, i.e., the respondent was asked how East Indians perceived Canadian women before they were asked the more direct question: How do you perceive Canadian women? Overall, East Indians have a positive attitude towards Canadian women. They felt that while at first Canadian women come across as cold and unfriendly giving the impression that relationships were superficial, they stated that with time they experienced Canadian women as much friendlier than originally thought. The respondents disliked generalizations made by some white Canadians that Indians are dirty, don't speak English, etc. They also disliked the over-emphasis on

physical beauty in the North American culture. Respondents said that most East Indians experience the directness shown by Canadian men and women as rather threatening, especially in the case of women, because such behaviours are not feminine at all in the Indian sense. American born Chinese and Japanese women report similar experiences. They find that as they become acculurated to American demands and expectations that women be assertive and aggressive, they are viewed almost as "foreigners" in their own particular sub-culture, again because the display of such attributes is contrary to the traditional expectations of the woman's behaviour. They experience a conflict between trying to emulate the model of behaviour created by American women and what feminine behaviour implies in their own sub-culture.

Indians quite often compared aspects of their home culture with Canadian culture, e.g. s, Indians felt that they were much more secure in relation to their spouses and families than are Canadian women; they felt that while Indian mannerisms may be abrupt, often Indians were more sincere than Canadians, and they felt that girls in Indian culture develop an inner sense of beauty, not merely the external aspect, which they perceive as over-emphasized in this culture.

Courtesy of my students, I distributed an identical questionnaire to Canadian volunteer respondents who readily responded to the same three basic questions: How do East Indian women "come across" to you; What do you <u>like</u> and <u>dislike</u> about them?

There was a duality aspect to many Canadian responses. For example, Canadians tended to like the East Indian

Woman's quiet, polite, shy manner but this liking moved to seeing her as cold, distant, aloof and unfriendly. A small percentage of the sample made comments such as: "they hold their noses a bit too high", "they think they are superior". Again, Canadians tended to like the Indian woman's devotion to her husband and children, but this moved to a dislike, in their perception, of her dependency on her husband and her place behind a man.

Canadian dislikes followed the stereotyped pattern. They said Indians were dirty. One woman wrote: I'd like to hand them some shampoo and Dial soap" and then she added: " I guess that is WASP prejudice!" They did not like Indians wearing their traditional dress; they think Indians shout "discrimination" too soon; they dislike Indians speaking in their own language, since they feel Indians should speak English if they live in Canada. Both cultural subgroups, however, made statements which indicated to this speaker that people realized there exists a lack of contact and communication. Some Canadians said that there was nothing they liked or disliked about Indian women. I am uncertain whether this comment implies "indifference" or "can't say" because I "don't know".

HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS, DATING, INTER-ETHNIC MARRIAGE

An attempt was made to find out about the attitudes of East Indians toward dating, marriage and heterosexual relationships. In the traditional Indian social system, there is no dating, girls are carefully protected, virginity is overwhelmingly important and, as stated earlier, the child's honour is bound up with the father

and family honour. Traditionally, marriage was by arrangement; there are few so-called "love marriages". In Indian thinking marriage cements families and ensures family continuity. The romantic notion of marriage prevailing in this culture comprises only a minor aspect of the Indian concept of marriage. Respondents reported that when Indian women enter the Canadian society they are confused at the heterosexual patterns they perceive; they are not prepared and are even shocked by the new heterosexual attitudes and behaviours confronting them. How do East Indians react to these new values and how do they resolve the differences in the two sets of cultural expectations? There was a range and a diversity in responses. Some Indians would stay as "Indians" as possible. They take their children back to India periodically so as to give the children an opportunity to learn Indian norms, values, and behaviours. Other people are somewhat more permissive but maintain control over their children's behaviours, and then there are those people who follow the Canadian pattern as they perceive it, i.e. a much more permissive pattern involving dating and freer heterosexual relationships. With regard to inter-ethnic marriage, again there was diversity in responses. Some people attempt to marry an Indian, Indian style. Other people accept an inter-ethnic marriage, sometimes with reservations; others overtly seem to accept it but respondents claim that these people experience an inner hurt and reservation that they do not openly verbalize. Since people do not openly speak about their feelings regarding inter-ethnic marriage, respondents resort to making judgements in terms of whether friends are invited to the marriage ceremony, how father and mother behave at the events, whether the father stays away in protest, and overt

features of that nature. People felt that the contrasts between the Canadian concept of marriage and the Indian accounted for Indian attitudes. Thus, for example, in the East Indian concept, marriage means continuity of family; parents feel they gain a child in marriage. In the Canadian concept, marriage is private and individual; Indian parents feel that in an inter-ethnic marriage they lose a child. They also feel that there is a difference in interpersonal relationships and communications created by an inter-ethnic marriage. Indians report that they do not feel the same closeness to a Canadian spouse in an inter-ethnic marriage as they do towards the ethnic partner. It was felt that the ethnic spouse should make a more conscious attempt to integrate the Canadian spouse into the ethnic group. Finally, respondents felt that since Indian parents view playing a role in the child's marriage, a privilege and a joy, when children went their own individual ways and chose their own partners that they were depriving parents of a very joyous activity in their lives.

There was consensus that at present few models of inter-ethnic marriage exist. So, too, there are few models on how to raise children in the Canadian setting with it's different view of heterosexual relationships. The feeling was that younger people with small children would have more time to think through how they were going to handle conflicting values about heterosexual relationships in the two cultures. With time more adequate models of heterosexual behaviour and inter-ethnic marriage would evolve.

Informants stated that Indian males may date Canadian women but tended to marry Indian women and seem to prefer them, because as they perceived it, Indian women are more stable, have a more permanent concept of marriage, and are more dependable. Indian men feel more secure in relating to Indian women, especially with respect to their loyalty. On the whole, there is little desertion of Indian women by Indian males in preference for Canadian women. Informants talked quite openly about the fact that Indian men are not socialized to handle dating situations as there is no dating behaviour in the Indian social system, nor are they socialized to handle pre-marital sex. Consequently, Canadian women who date Indians, do complain about inappropriate behaviours by Indian males in dating settings. Canadian women find Indian men "too demanding" as informants put it, and they may not continue the dating relationship.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

May I bring closure to this address with three concluding comments:

(i) My readings, study, observation and experience lead me to believe that it is important to retain selected aspects of both old and new values and traditions for the wholesome evolution and integration of the personality. Those values which are perceived by a people as critical to the inner self, the sense of identity and personal worth should be nurtured and preserved for a healthy evolving "new" self, within the host

culture. People cannot be expected to, nor should they simply abandon values and philosophies basic to their sense of "being" in too short a period of time as occurred in the case of Canadian Indians. I have been a member of a minority group all my life and in my perception the gradual evolution in adapting and reconstructing the inner self as people move from home to host culture is a psychologically sounder process than rapid change and abandonment of values that are profoundly meaningful to the inner self. The latter process may well produce disintegration of the inner self with resultant negative features for the minority group itself and the whole culture.

(ii) There is an urgent need for more contact and communication between ethnic "newcomers" and the larger Canadian Society at a deeper, more meaningful level, than that of ethnic food and folk dancing. The diversity of values, philosophies, and interpretations of life that immigrant peoples bring with them implies a potentially rich contribution to the host culture. As is commonly recognized, however, the visibility factor - both physical and behavioural - create social contrast effects, i.e. these differences are exaggerated, and socially distant relationships tend to arise between immigrant persons and people in the larger society. Even small behavioural differences may generate social distance, e.g., people who have not been socialized to greet by shaking hands

but rather by joining the hands together as in Indian culture, understandably may not have acquired the kinds of "messages" (confidence, friendship, etc.,) communicated in the handshake by people socialized to greet in this manner; Indian students accustomed to sitting in upright cross-legged position on the floor, may adopt the same position on a chair. Both behaviours have come to my attention as irritating to people outside the Indian culture. Unless such seemingly simple behavioural differences are viewed in perspective, they may become exaggerated and a basis for strained relationships.

(iii) Finally there is a great deal of talent, intelligence, and energy among the East Indian women that the reported research has barely tapped. The Canadian interviewers employed in this study were impressed with the respondents they met. It remains for those of us who are concerned about ethnic groups and their contribution to Canadian society to assist in mobilizing and channelling these attributes towards promoting the creative genius of this great country and the "just" society.

Thank you very much.